

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 August 2004

Korean textile workers blockade plant

More than 1,000 unionised workers, who have been on strike since June 23, continue to blockade Kolon Industries' main plant in Gumi, South Korea. The textile manufacturing plant is about 260 kilometres southeast of Seoul. Police have set up roadblocks around the area to stop more workers joining the blockade. The strikers are seeking a pay increase and demanding that management back away from restructuring plans, including winding down a polyester-yarn-producing facility, that could lead to large layoffs.

Over the past month, the company has sacked a union leader and filed criminal charges against 12 workers. Another 15 workers are facing disciplinary action. The company claims the blockade and picket are "illegal activities" because they represent "interference in management".

Distillery workers vote to strike

On August 13, unionised workers at rice liquor distillery company Jinro Ltd in South Korea voted by a 97 percent majority to strike in support of claims for a pay increase, a five-day working week and job security. If the strike goes ahead, it will be the first in the company's 80-year history. On August 16, workers imposed a work-to-rule at the plant, refusing to work more than the standard eight-hour day.

A union spokesman said the campaign would begin with partial strikes of up to two hours, followed by a general strike if the company failed to respond. The union, however, dropped its claim for a 12.8 percent pay increase and accepted the seven percent offered by management, while issues over working conditions remain unresolved. The distiller has been under court receivership since May 2003, with a debt of about 2.9 trillion won. Out of a total workforce of 1,800, there are 1,466 unionised workers at Jinro.

Maritime workers to strike

Maritime workers in South Korea voted on August 16 to strike from the end of the month. They are protesting the government's continual revisions of seafaring legislation in line with the demands of the employers. They are also seeking a reduction in working hours and increased holiday pay.

A spokesman for the 50,000-strong Federation of Korean Seafarers Unions said this week: "The government proceeded with the revised sea-worker law without an agreement between management and labour." If the strike goes ahead, it will disrupt shipping in the country's largest port, Busan.

Filipino bank workers threaten to strike over pay

Staff at the Bank of the Philippine Islands (BPI) are threatening to strike if the management continues to refuse to complete negotiations on aspects of a five-year collective bargaining agreement.

The BPI-Employees Union-Associated Labor Union (BPIEU-ALU), covering workers at 18 bank branches in Cebu and the provinces, filed a notice of strike on August 13. The union's local president, Milbert Dacayana, said workers are seeking a salary increase, together with a cost of living allowance and other benefits.

BPI management may be attempting to force the dispute into arbitration.

In a recent press release, it said the law provides for stalled negotiations to be submitted to the Department of Labor and Employment for "conciliation and resolution".

Non-academic staff in Sri Lanka support assistants' strike

Non-academic staff at the Open University of Sri Lanka went on a token strike on August 18 in support of striking teaching assistants. The assistants began an indefinite strike on August 6, demanding the implementation of all due promotions. The strike is affecting classes at 22 centres, including the main campus in Nawala on the outskirts of Colombo. About 35,000 students are affected.

According to the assistants' union, over the past 15 years, 85 of its members have been refused promotions to which they have been entitled.

Health workers fight for daily allowance increase

Casual health workers in Sri Lanka protested in front of the Health Ministry in central Colombo for one hour on August 11. They are demanding a daily allowance increase, permanency of employment and overtime pay arrears. The government has not yet fulfilled a promise it made on July 15 to increase allowances.

Indian rice mill workers fight wage cut

Rice milling workers at several mills in Manachanallur, Tiruchi and in the southern Indian State of Tamilnadu began a series of protests on August 18 to oppose a 20 percent wage cut. The actions included marches and a rally.

Mill managements claim the wage cut is necessary because of low prices offered by the Food Corporation of India for hulling the rice (removing the outer husk).

WA contract workers reject union call to end strike

On August 19, 120 contract workers on strike at the Muja and Kwinana power stations in Western Australia's southwest voted down a recommendation by union officials to abide by an Australian Industrial Relations Commission order to end a six-week strike. AIRC deputy president Nick Blain issued the order this week, opening up unions and individual workers to fines.

The workers, members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Communications Electrical and Plumbers Union, are employed by contractor United KG/Siemans. They are seeking a new work agreement including improved pay and working conditions. The company is contracted by Western Power to carry out maintenance work.

Western Australian Deputy Premier and Energy Minister Eric Ripper claimed this week that the strike was delaying Western Power's maintenance program, which could not be completed until December, even with a speedy end to the strike. He warned that continued industrial action increased the likelihood of blackouts in communities south of Geraldton and east to Kalgoorlie in the coming summer.

A union spokesman, however, accused Western Power of "scare mongering" over the strike's impact on power supplies.

Disability workers demand pay increase and funding

Members of the Health and Community Services Union No2 branch in Victoria have begun a campaign of rolling stoppages against the state

Labor government's refusal to negotiate a new certified agreement. The workers, who care for people with disabilities, are demanding a six percent pay increase, improved work safety and better government funding.

On August 19, staff protested outside Kew Cottages, informing passersby about the campaign and the conditions of workers in the industry. Work stoppages are planned at about 100 other community houses in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. Further stoppages are scheduled in the state's southwest region, affecting services from Geelong to Hamilton and Portland.

A union spokesman claimed that services were vastly under-resourced, making it difficult for disabled people "to access and participate in the community" and that workers suffered one of the highest rates of occupational assault. The government has repeatedly cancelled negotiation meetings and is refusing to make a decent pay offer. The union has called on the government to negotiate and settle the dispute, "before it gets out of control".

Rail workers threaten strike over layoffs

Workers at Alstom's Railway Service Centre in Ballarat, Victoria are threatening industrial action if the French engineering company fails to withdraw its plan to shed 33 jobs. The threat comes after the management gave an August 20 deadline for workers to accept "voluntary redundancies" before it started issuing selective dismissal notices. The centre, purchased by the company in 1999, employs about 150 workers.

Ferry masters stop to discuss work agreement

Ferry services in Sydney were disrupted by a five-hour work stoppage by 80 ferry masters this week. Members of the Australian Maritime Officers Union attended a meeting to discuss the progress of negotiations for a new enterprise work agreement. Management said the work stoppage was standard during negotiations and no further industrial action was anticipated.

Call centre workers impose work bans

Call centre workers working for Queensland Fire and Rescue Services are maintaining the work bans on administrative duties they imposed on August 13. The workers are angry over delays in evaluating wage rates in regional and metropolitan call centres. The dispute has continued since April, with little progress made toward resolution.

New Zealand teachers meet over contract offer

New Zealand secondary school teachers have begun a nationwide series of stopwork meetings to decide whether to accept a pay deal that will provide salary increases of 8.5 to 13 percent over three years. The Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) called the offer "substantial and attractive", and will recommend it.

During the previous contract round, rank and file teachers rejected a series of settlements recommended by the union and staged wildcat strikes. Because strike action is illegal while a contract is in force, the new three-year deal, if ratified, will ensure the government an extended period of industrial peace. The PPTA claims that the offer represents a new phase in co-operative industrial relations, based on a "problem solving" approach rather than confrontation.

The deal, which covers about 15,000 teachers in 365 schools, includes a middle management package on pay and workloads, guaranteed non-contact time for teachers in management roles from 2005, and increased non-contact time for all secondary teachers from 2006.

The NZ Educational Institute (NZEI), which represents almost 30,000 primary, intermediate and area schoolteachers, this week suspended plans for industrial action after making what it called "significant progress" in its collective agreement negotiations. The union had earlier threatened to call paid union meetings in school time to consider industrial action over its claims for increased non-contact time.

Christchurch nurses and health workers to strike

Nurses employed by Christchurch's Nurse Maude Association will walk

off the job on August 30 for four hours. The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) served a strike notice this week for the 200 NZNO members in the association's hospice and dementia units and for those employed as district nurses.

A NZNO advocate said the strike would go ahead if mediation set down for August 19 failed to produce an acceptable offer. The nurses are seeking the same conditions and rates of pay as their counterparts employed in similar work throughout the Christchurch area. The current pay offer is \$3,500 below that for nurses in the Canterbury District Health Board, and below industry standards for sick leave, weekend rates and reimbursement for a practising certificate required by the employer.

Meanwhile, health workers employed by private mental health provider Richmond Fellowship have resolved to take industrial action for a collective employment agreement. Delegates from the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) met at the end of last week to plan the strike.

Negotiations between the combined unions—NUPE and the Service and Food Workers Union—and Richmond Fellowship have been in progress since last Christmas without the employer making a pay offer. Richmond workers previously took strike action in May and June, but on those occasions gave the employer sufficient notice to minimise effects on patients. This time workers decided to reduce the notice period to a few days.

Nurses picket over union discrimination

Christchurch nurses and other health workers mounted a picket on August 13 after Guardian Healthcare offered a pay increase to non-union staff only. Parklands Hospital staff picketed the Papanui Road aged care hospital during the afternoon rush hour.

A NZ Nurses Association (NZNO) organiser said the 50 NZNO members at the hospital were angry that non-union members had received a 3.75 pay increase while union members received nothing. The Parklands staff have also been excluded from national collective agreement negotiations covering union members elsewhere in the country. They have been awarded no pay increase since receiving just one percent in 2002.

Many attempts were made to get Guardian Healthcare to rectify the situation, but these proved unsuccessful. The company has declined mediation.

Solomon Islands plantation strike enters ninth week

A strike by workers at Russell Island Plantation Estate Limited (RIPEL) in the Solomon Islands is continuing despite threats of legal action and court orders for the arrest of union officials. The company has also asked police to "assist in the dispute".

Production virtually ceased at the RIPEL copra and cocoa plantation at Yandina on Russell Island when over 1,000 employees walked off the job on June 17. Early last month, RIPEL lawyers sent letters to the Prime Minister, Police Minister and Police Commissioner complaining that police were reluctant to get involved in the dispute and were "not co-operative" in serving summonses for union officials to attend a Trade Disputes Panel hearing. General manager John Whiteside claimed the company was losing \$SI80,000 (\$US27,000) daily and began legal proceedings to sue the workers for compensation on July 20.

The workers are opposing a new harvesting system under which at least 100 workers have been sacked since last September. A spokesman for the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW) said RIPEL also sacked the wives of the terminated workers, evicted them from company homes and ordered them to leave on the first boat out of Yandina.

Company and union representatives have been in negotiations since August 10, but no result is in sight. The union has called for Whiteside's sacking.

General strike in French Polynesia averted

French Polynesia's President Oscar Temaru and two of Tahiti's largest labour unions have signed an agreement avoiding a general strike that was set to take place on August 16. The ATi'A I Mua and the Confederation

of Independent Unions of French Polynesia (CSIP) filed notice of intent to strike on August 6.

The union feared that the government was attempting to take over the affairs and running of the social services agency (CPS), presently managed jointly by the unions and employers. In order to settle the dispute, the government affirmed its commitment not to intervene in CPS management arrangements.

Meanwhile, the government is in negotiations with CSIP over a strike by fuel workers who are concerned that current work agreements would be void if the company changes hands. The strike began on August 12, stopping the delivery of fuel to petrol stations and the refuelling of aircraft.

Fiji aviation engineers fight to save jobs

Striking Air Fiji Limited engineers appeared before the Arbitration Tribunal on August 17, seeking an order preventing the company from replacing them with alternative labour. Thirty engineers walked off the job on July 27 over the sacking of the company's chief engineer, who is also the president of the Air Fiji Engineering Association (AFEA). The company claimed the strike was illegal and sacked 27 engineers who refused to return to work.

The company has advertised for recruits to replace the sacked workers and last week filed an order in the High Court to sue AFEA and Fiji Council of Trade Unions general secretary Attar Singh for \$600,000 (\$US333,000) damages. Arbitration Tribunal hearings will take place over three days from September 21.



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